



Harriet Van Horne

CONSPIRACY BUFFS

"Conspiracy" is a word I gladly yield to the far right. Conspiracy connotes not simply the wicked and unlawful, but something downright loony as well. It's a word corrupted beyond its Latin roots, a word that comforts the paranoid and titillates the simple. In a gentler age, poets wrote of larks conspiring in song, and Sir Philip Sydney described a beautiful woman as a conspiracy of graces.

And now I turn to the daily mail, and here's a letter from a college student asking, "Why don't you write about the CIA conspiracy behind the Patty Hearst kidnapping?"

Why indeed?

I can only reply that while I hold the CIA in low esteem I never dreamed they had set up the abduction of Miss Hearst. Will my correspondent please enlighten me?

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The entire Watergate scandal, from the break-in onward, is described in pulpy tracts, both left and right, as a conspiracy by, variously, the CIA, the Communist Party, Texas oil barons or a cabal that mysteriously combines all three.

The underground press—and some respected writers operating well above the ground—have been saying for years that the CIA plotted the killing of both John and Robert Kennedy. Some of the evidence they cite has a terrifying logic in it.

In recent months the all-night radio shows have been turning up "researchers"—so they like to be called—who confide that Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald was a secret agent, that Sirhan Sirhan was under hypnosis when he shot Bobby Kennedy and that Sen. Ted Kennedy's car was pushed off the bridge at Chappaquidick by a CIA agent.

Most of the far-out literature that comes in my daily mail is glanced at and discarded. The tone is depressingly consistent: wild assertions, and notable absence of proof. But the stories are as hard to kill as Rasputin. They are revived from time to time as fresh discoveries. At least once a month I receive a letter demanding to know why nobody has looked into that plane crash that killed Mrs. E. Howard Hunt. "I know for a fact that she was carrying \$100,000 and that the pilot had been poisoned." Or maybe she was carrying \$500,000 and the pilot had a small bullet hole in his head.

There's a Rashomon factor in all these tales. But what's significant is not the distortion but the desperate need of the people to know what is going on.

The queen of the conspiracy theorists is a Carmel, Calif., "researcher" named Mae Brussell. Her name turns up as the source in a surprising number of my "Why don't you look into—" letters. Mrs. Brussell teaches a college course in Conspiracy—that's right—and is heard regularly on West Coast radio and, now and then, on WBAI here. Not long ago I had a letter from her. She is a compulsive checker of facts. She has cross-referenced all 26 volumes of the Warren Commission report. She reads eight newspapers a day. She will shortly launch a "Conspiracy Newsletter," to be mailed twice a month. One of her admirers says he has graduated from believing in coincidence to believing in

conspiracy.

Writing of the Watergate break-in in the *Realist*, Mae Brussell would have us believe that the CIA was behind the street demonstrations in Miami during the Republican Convention of 1972, that a plan to cause so great a ruckus as to bring on martial law somehow misfired.

"The significance of the Watergate affair," she writes, "is that every element essential for a political coup d'etat in the U.S. was assembled at the time of their arrest. The team of men represented at the hotel went all the way from the White House with its emergency contingency unit, walkie-talkies and private radio frequency, to the paid street provocateurs and troops who would create the emergencies. Was the target of their association the cancellation of elections in 1972?"

It is basic to the theory of the conspiracy buffs that two governments co-exist in this country. One is visible and ineffective, the other clandestine and fiendishly efficient. The assassination of President Kennedy was necessary, say these fanciers of plot and perfidy, to maintain the power of the clandestine. On the night of his primary victory in California, they add, Sen. Robert Kennedy was murdered by the same people.

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One tends to dismiss all such statements as the musing of a fevered mind. But a number of thoughtful books by such accredited authorities as David Wise and Fletcher Prouty have divulged blood-chilling details of CIA operations.

"It [the CIA] has its secrets," writes Col. Prouty. "It has self righteous power over life and death. It does not believe in anything. It does not value anything. It is utterly ruthless."

Before his death, we learn from many sources, President Kennedy had decided to cut the hidden nerve centers of the CIA. His brothers have shared his view. Mind you, I still reject all conspiracy theories. But I wish Congress would cut off all future funding for the CIA.